

LANGUAGE POLICY FOR MINORITY LANGUAGES IN THAILAND AND CHINA

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Introduction

There are five large minority groups found both in Thailand and in China; they are the Lahu (Musur), Akha (Ikaw), Lisu, Mong (Hmong, Meo, Miao) and Mien (Yao). Each of these groups also lives in two or more other countries including Laos, Myanmar, India and Vietnam. The total current population of these five transnational minorities is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Transnational minorities, Thailand and China

group	total population	China population	Thailand population
Lahu	630,000	360,000	65,000
Akha	500,000	255,000	38,000
Lisu	850,000	575,000	28,000
Mong	5,000,000	4,200,000	150,000
Mien	1,800,000	1,400,000	38,000

While each of these five languages has substantial internal dialect diversity, in all but one case there is a generally-agreed standard dialect used as a lingua franca and for writing. The Lahu standard is Black Lahu, the Lisu is northern Lisu, the Mong standard is White Hmong (very similar to the Green Mong of Thailand), and the Mien standard is Mien as spoken in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and parts of China as well as among refugees elsewhere. The composite Hani nationality of China, as discussed below, includes diverse languages and the standard Hani chosen there is fairly similar to Akha but not identical. Printing and other media including the regular radio broadcasts by the Thai government and Chinese government stations use Black Lahu, northern Lisu, Mong (in Thailand, Yunnan and parts of Guizhou) and Mien (in various areas including Thailand, Yunnan and Guangxi) and to a small extent Hani; in the Akha

area of China, Xishuangbanna, there are even more limited Akha broadcasts; these are much more extensive in Thailand.

Thailand

The general Thai policy towards hill tribes is very supportive, providing substantial assistance in education, medical care, marketing traditional products, new crops and roads to transport them to markets on. This process has been increasingly rapid over the last twenty years, and has been very strongly supported by members of the Royal Family, the Border Patrol Police, the Public Welfare Department, and many other government agencies. There have been some problems in the delivery of government services arising from remoteness and Thai attitudes to hill tribes, and economic problems associated with population pressure and land scarcity - augmented by a very large-scale movement of Thais into traditional hill tribe areas and increasingly by restrictions on land use and crops over the last twenty years. In general the transitional, integrative policies of the Thai government do not support the maintenance of traditional culture and language.

Special institutions for the hill tribes include a number of nikhoms (welfare centers); the Tribal Research Institute in Chiangmai; a number of handicraft distribution and sales operations, several sponsored by members of the Royal Family; and various hostels in towns such as Fang, Chiangmai, Chiangrai and elsewhere where hill tribe children stay while studying at schools in the town. As the schools provided in many hill tribe villages tend to reach only lower primary, such hostels are urgently needed but so far have mainly been provided by Christian organizations, not the government.

One result of the various programs which do reach the villages is rapidly increasing ability of the hill tribes to speak Thai, especially among those (mainly Christian) young people who manage to attend schools in towns and become able to participate fully in Thai society by acquiring professional qualifications. Literacy in Thai is still not widespread, but speaking and understanding Thai to some degree is now virtually universal. Insofar as they are literate in their own languages, these groups in Thailand use missionary-devised romanized scripts. Naturally it is

mainly the Christians, assisted by missionaries, who achieve literacy in their first language - usually in tandem with study of the Thai curriculum in schools partly supported by the community or the missionaries, or in extra classes run by local pastors.

The Lahu romanization was devised in the 1920s in Myanmar by Protestants and is very widely used there and in Thailand by Christians who form about a third of the Lahu population of Thailand. Based on this is the Akha romanization devised in the 1950s and more recently introduced into Thailand with rather restricted success. There is a competing Catholic romanization for Lahu, but this is much less used. The Mong romanization was agreed upon in the 1950s by Protestant and Catholic missionaries in Laos, and has subsequently spread into Thailand via refugee populations; despite its many digraphs, it is very widely used especially in refugee camps. Also very widespread (but perhaps less in Thailand than in Myanmar) is the Fraser script for Lisu, devised in the 1920s and using upright and inverted capital letters, some in rather novel phonetic values. The most recent Mien romanization has not spread as widely as the Lahu, Mong or Lisu scripts; Mien also have a tradition of using Chinese characters for liturgical purposes. Other competing indigenous scripts have been developed for Lisu (see Bradley and Kane 1981) and for Mong (see Smalley et al. 1990) but have had very limited dissemination.

While the Thai government has expressed its preference that hill tribe languages be written with Thai-based scripts, those which have been devised have met with little success; for some examples see Smalley (1976). This preference does not extend to the prohibition of missionary-devised roman scripts, though of course the government also does nothing to support these. In general, it wishes to ensure that the hill tribes are good citizens, increasingly forming a part of the Thai nation albeit culturally and linguistically distinct. This is not incompatible with literacy in the hill tribe language as long as it is accompanied by knowledge of Thai.

China

The official policy on nationalities derives from Lenin's policy, which recognises the rights of minorities and seeks to establish and develop grouped nationalities based on combinations of one or more similar minorities. At present there are 55 recognized national minorities in China; the process of recognition as a national minority is long and complicated. The right of nationalities to maintain their languages and cultures is embodied in the Chinese constitution; conversely, nationalities may also choose not to maintain them. Autonomous regions, prefectures, counties and lower-level units are established for the recognized nationalities; but like everything else in China the actual degree of local autonomy is determined by general political trends throughout the country.

There has been a conscious effort to improve the living standards of the nationalities, with large subsidies going to their autonomous areas. On the other hand many traditional aspects of culture which were judged to be out of step with Communist ideology have been eliminated. The positive side of this process has created local industry, communication and education networks and economic development; but this has also brought very large numbers of Han Chinese into every part of China, and thus has greatly increased the exposure of the national minorities to Chinese language and culture.

There are various official bodies which provide special linguistic services for recognized national minorities. Many of these are controlled from the State Nationality Affairs Commission at the China-wide level, with provincial and local offshoots. Special provision is made for education in the form of Institutes of Nationalities scattered around the country in relevant provincial capitals, and also special primary and secondary schools at lower levels. In admission to these and other educational institutions as in many other things members of national minorities receive preferential treatment. There is extensive media provision through national and various provincial Nationalities Publishing Houses, central, provincial and prefectural radio and translation services, editions of Chinese newspapers and magazines and original periodicals in the languages of various national minorities. Maintenance of culture is meant to be provided through national

and local 'culture palaces', museums and so on; and various folkloristic troupes are maintained.

As noted, the Leninist policy explicitly proposes to lump similar groups together and forge new, larger united nationalities. In the five cases considered here, the Lahu nationality in China includes a separate group, the Kucong (in Vietnam Cosung), who are rather distinct but were added to the Lahu in 1984 after a request for separate nationality status was rejected. The Hani nationality includes the Akha of China along with the closely related Hani and its various dialects and subgroups as well as several other progressively less closely related languages such as Haoni, Baihong, Biyue and Kaduo. The Miao nationality in China comprises three main subgroups, Western (Hmong), Central (Hmo) and Eastern (Quxiong), the first of which includes Mong and related dialects; in the linguistic sense these are at least three distinct languages. The Yao nationality in China links Mien and related more or less distant dialects along with the more distantly related Bunu language and its dialects and the unrelated Lajia (Lakkia) language, the latter more closely related to Thai than to Mien.

For each of these five nationalities, new orthographies have been devised based on selected standard dialects. The Lahu, Hani, Lisu and Mien are romanizations with various conventions derived from Chinese pinyin. For Miao three distinct pinyin-derived romanizations, one for each of the three main subdivisions, are in use. Furthermore, some Miao still use the Pollard script, devised by an American missionary on syllabic principles early in the twentieth century. In China the new Lisu romanization is in competition with the missionary-devised Fraser script, which is widely used in Myanmar and to a lesser degree in Thailand; the latter is increasing its use in China, as noted below.

The revised Lahu and Lisu scripts took their current form by the late 1950s; the 'Western Miao' or Mong script and the Mien script are of similar vintage but did not come into general use until more recently. The similar Hani script of the mid-1950s was rejected by the Hani; from the late 1950s this script in its initial form disappeared forever, after the members of the nationality (or its leaders) decided to use Chinese as their written language instead. However a

revised version is now being introduced after preparatory work during the mid to late 1980s. As for most things to do with national minorities, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s was a time of very limited activity on the language front - though various political works were published in certain languages during the Cultural Revolution from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

Conclusion

There are two recent positive developments which increase the potential unity of two of the five groups discussed here. In a unique display of transnational solidarity, the Mien in 1984 managed to agree on one romanization which is now widespread among the Mien in China and the refugee population from Laos in non-Asian countries; see Purnell (1987). This required some compromises on both sides, but should greatly facilitate communication among Mien throughout the world.

Another breakthrough for continuing written contact between the Lisu in and out of China has been the revival since the early 1980s of the Fraser script in China, apparently by popular demand and at the expense of the new romanization which continues to be used as well, though much less than it was from 1958 to the mid-1980s.

Similar moves among the Lahu have not surfaced, and the latest versions of the Hani and Mong orthographies from outside China are too recent to have had any currency in China prior to 1949. It is said that some Mong in China now wish to use the overseas romanization; a separate romanization from that used for Hani elsewhere but based on the same principles is also in very limited use for Akha in Xishuangbanna adjacent to the Akha areas of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

The different policies for minorities in Thailand and in China have had a considerable effect on the development of five minorities living in both countries; this is reflected in their current language use. In addition the development of different orthographies for all but the Mien (Yao) and the revived Lisu Fraser script have made it impossible for materials published inside China to be used outside, or for those from outside China

including Thailand to be read in China. This is despite what appear to the linguist to be rather small differences.

In spite of the Thai government's assimilation policy, the five languages discussed here are very strongly maintained there, even in the general absence of first-language literacy and a corresponding spread of Thai language knowledge including some literacy. Conversely in China it appears that the pressure of Sinicization and the limited availability of minority-language education outside specific national minority autonomous areas is leading to fairly large-scale shift to Chinese language. Most of the Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Mong and Mien who succeed in the Chinese system have accepted Chinese language and culture; it is only the language professionals (in publishing, media and educational institutions) who maintain their first language while living in a Chinese milieu. Thus, in effect, the outcomes are exactly opposite to what one would predict given the nominal official policies, but not too suprising given the free nature of Thai society and the centrally-controlled situation which obtains in China.

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